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Beyond Discipline: Discipline and Lenience in the study of religion.

Introduction

Authors: Maya Mayblin & Diego Maria Malara

Questions of discipline – both discipline of others and self-discipline – matter today as much as they ever did. Airport bookshelves are crammed with books selling us discipline: techniques enabling us to ‘do more’, techniques enabling us ‘do less’. Discourses of exertion and relaxation, of will power and self-abstention, come at us from a bewildering number of angles. Discipline, it would seem, is thus no less ubiquitous, no less penetrating, no less a driver of subjectivity than when under Foucault’s famous gaze. But how much do social scientists assume when they place discipline at the centre of subjecthood? If selves can be mastered, can they also be unmastered? And what sorts of ends would un-mastering, or even a simple absence of discipline serve? The question and central contribution of this special section is to reappraise discipline by training a lens on its counterpart: lenience. The term lenience is defined by the Oxford English dictionary as the ‘fact or quality of being more merciful or tolerant than expected’. Yet, it might also be thought of as a fact or quality of plasticity or flexibility. As a noun lenience denotes a loosening or lessening of something, normally some chore, practice, or punishment; but this does not necessarily make it stand for a lack. On the contrary, lenience can signal a forceful presence; as some of its numerous synonyms indicate, it can manifest as an overflowing or a positive charge: tolerance, mercy, clemency, grace, kindness, and compassion. Whatever lenience is, it presents us, we suggest, with a rich seam for thinking more deeply about discipline, whether as concept or as a practice which has particular material effects on the world.

Although there are clearly so many areas of life in which questions of discipline and lenience would apply, the essays of this special section all explore the topic from the vantage point of religion. The anthropology of religion has a long and fertile history for intellectual discussions of discipline, particularly in relation to projects of piety, ethics, and selfhood. Thus, it provides a well-elaborated field of debate to which explorations of ‘lenience’ may be interposed. Lenience abounds, we only have to look for it. What, we ask, would a diffuse, widespread, or contained but intensive failure to live ‘according to the rules’ mean for religious institutions if lenience were not part of their armoury? How would religious traditions resist the stresses and strains of contradiction and idiosyncrasy if certain agreed strategies for dealing with negative (or anti-traditional) forces were not in play? Although a good deal of important discussion has already occurred on questions of ‘doubt’ and experiences of ‘failure’ in religious contexts, in much of this literature the focus remains on ‘contingency’ and its effects, or on the reflexive capacities by which individuals deal with religious failure¹.

In this introductory essay, however, we are interested in failure at the level of the collective – failure that would not be ‘contingent’ because it has, in some form or other, already been foreseen and collectively dealt with. In other words, we seek to explore what ‘lenience’ adds to a contemporary anthropology of ethics and religion, by looking at the sorts of questions it invites us to ask about religion in the grandest sociological sense. Not enough attention has been given, we feel, to the distance vantage point. Thus we ask what happens when we ‘scale up’ and approach religion, not simply from the viewpoint of individual interlocutors, but as a largescale social system, which reproduces itself successfully because, on various interconnecting levels, it is able to contain its own failure. As Joel Robbins and Leanne

¹ For a thorough review of this debate see Kloos and Beekers 2018.

Williams Green suggest, the notion of failure as sin is central to the very idea of Christianity: ‘without it, Christianity would not have the shape it has; it would not define salvation in the ways it does nor would it make salvation central to its definition of religious purpose’ (2018:21). Failure in the form of sinfulness is, to put it another way, part of Christianity’s DNA: a basic, and structuring principle. With this special section, our focus is on ‘scaling up’, using ethnography to illustrate ‘systems’ which can only be properly perceived at a more distant theoretical remove. We propose lenience, not as an opposite to discipline, but as a way to sharpen our understanding, not simply of agency, power-relations, and ethics, but of how ethics creates systems that are experienced, in some sense, as ‘holistic’ and intellectually coherent, and/or that can be objectified as veritable entities (such as a Church, or a seminary) with discernible boundaries and functions in the world. ²

If ‘scaling up’ is one conscious goal of this introductory essay, a second is to question certain tendencies in the literature that has otherwise inspired us. The first tendency concerns a pattern of resorting to capitalist metaphors of profit and productivity when describing failure: failure and doubt have a tendency to be described as ‘productive,’ or as ‘grounds for action’. Linked in some ways to the first, another trend we aim to question is a creeping propensity for social theories around ethics and failure to draw heavily on the sorts of logics produced by religions of the world-renouncing variety, and particularly the Abrahamic traditions. On this point, it is worth noting that what many of the authors in this broader literature have in common are ethnographic field-sites in which reformist versions of Islam and Christianity are dominant. However, as Diana Espirito Santo’s essay for this special section reveals, in many alternative religious traditions (particularly in non-monotheistic and non-world renouncing

² In this we are partially indebted to scholars such as Talcott Parsons (1954) and Niklas Luhmann (2006; 2012) whose influential thinking on ‘systems’ remains provocative food for contemporary anthropological theory .

forms of practice) we discover models of personhood radically different from the inward-looking, hyper-reflexive ‘selves’ examined in many contemporary studies of religion and ethics.

Discipline, Lenience: on the scale of the question

Our ability to identify discipline as a topic and our proposal to explore it here is indebted, in the first instance, to a rather impressive body of thinking on the subject inspired by Michel Foucault (e.g. Asad 1993; Hirschkind 2006; Faubion 2001, 2012; Laidlaw 1995, 2002; Mahmood 2001, 2003, 2005). In ‘Discipline and Punish’ (1975), Foucault introduced the idea of ‘disciplinary techniques’ – practices which molded modern subjects, normalizing practices which made individuals complicit with extant relations of power. Institutional power was revealed to be the product of new forms of bodily and spatial control, which relied on increasingly sophisticated regimes of visibility. Foucault’s later works on ethics marked a shift of focus from ‘discipline’ to ideas of ‘self-care’ and ‘freedom’. In this later period, Foucault, now seeking to understand *self-discipline* and *self-governance*, investigated techniques whereby ‘the subject constitutes itself in an active fashion through practices of the self’, following procedural regimes which are not ‘invented by the individual himself’, but rather ‘models that he finds in his culture and are proposed, suggested, imposed on him by his culture, his society, or social group’ (1997: 291).

In ‘Sexualities’, Foucault (1979) turned productively to the history of Western Christianity, to show how ‘care of the self’ became progressively geared around dissection of the interior-self, as exemplified by ritual technologies like confession and penance. This led to new types of apprehension around the ‘desirous self’: the self, seen ‘increasingly as a self with secret

desires - paradigmatically and most persistently sexual desires' (Laidlaw 2002: 325; see Foucault 1997). Anxieties about the legibility of the 'desirous self' and its murky depths called for systematic self-monitoring which brought new subjects into being and, in turn, presaged the development of modern psychoanalytical regimes. Discipline, in the form of self-discipline, was arguably the central and defining concerns of Foucault's oeuvre on governmentality, and the analytical language he bequeathed to social thought brought about an axial shift in the way anthropologists sought to understand the world (see Foucault 2000). Certainly, within the anthropology of religion such a shift opened the way to ever-finer documentation of modes of self-fashioning –generating particular discussion of the formation of the subject's interiority – and has led to what has become widely known as the anthropology of ethics.

For Laidlaw, a turn to ethics heralds an important move away from crude sociological models which posit human action as the 'mechanical self-reproduction of "objective structures"' (2014: 10). The claim on which the anthropology of ethics rests is, he posits, a descriptive one: that lived values are, in essence, conflictive, and humans evaluative. 'Actually living a life', he writes:

'requires doing so with reference to values that make conflicting demands, and managing the inherently irresolvable tensions between them. . . . A form of life such as this then, which answers to diverse and conflicting values, must needs be lived as something more internally complex and ironic than the execution of a consistent project and the achievement of a self-consistent moral will, and this is true even of a people who accept and articulate just such a self-representation.'

(Laidlaw 2014: 169)

This makes for what many anthropologists are now calling ‘ethical processes’, the continual unfolding-into-the-world of interior complexity. It could be claimed that the ‘anthropology of ethics’, in its various forms, has succeeded the study of disciplinary structures – at least in so far as discipline is understood, apropos of Foucault, to index a type of ethical feedback loop between shared values, individual interiority, and physical conduct.

Laidlaw’s greatest inspiration for laying down an anthropology of ethics and freedom were Indian Jains. Jains find themselves born into a religious system of extreme asceticism. To live a life completely in synch with Jain ideals would be, in their own terms, ‘impossible’. As such there are lay Jains (householders) and ascetic Jains (world renouncers), and these constitute differing paths. Householders resign themselves to the sins of being in this world, their only positive remit being to venerate, protect and materially support the ones who renounce it (Laidlaw 1995). The Jain example is rich for thinking through matters of lenience. The social expectation is, we are told, for extreme self-discipline; but a sliding scale of toleration for those who circumvent the rules allows the majority of householders off the hook. For Laidlaw, the most productive way of looking at what it means to be a lay Jain is in terms of ethics because ‘ethical considerations are pervasive on the surface of human social life’ (2014: 3). In short: ‘The only way even to begin to make sense of what it might be to be a good lay Jain, is to be reflectively, unquestioningly, and uncomfortably conscious that one is not living. . . . sanely in one’s world at all’ (ibid.: 128).

Be that as it may, the Jain example gives rise to a very particular experience of moral discomfort because the system as whole has lenience built into it. Jains have recourse to the category of ‘householder’ with its attendant rules and psychological comforts. This

elaborated category is not invented afresh by each Jain individual; it is already in existence and constitutes an acceptable – if less perfect – pathway of discovery. Rituals of cleansing and purification that work continually to mitigate the worst of aspects of pollution might also be looked at in such a way (Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994). To claim, then, that Jainism constitutes a ‘system’ with a certain degree of lenience built into it is not, ipso facto, a claim that Jains are, individually, reflexive subjects.³ The former is a claim about a ‘system’ that is, to academic intents and purposes, an abstraction; while the latter is a claim about the nature of first-person experience. The position we advocate is not a giving up of what we know about the world from the first person perspective, it is simply about being open to vantage points or theoretical formations that, in combination with detailed ethnography, can help us to ‘know’ things differently. This ‘getting to know’ things differently by attending both to the macro and the micro has arguably always been needed for anthropological analysis.⁴

What systemic vantage points tend to reveal is the often taken-for-granted fact that systems exist because of divisions of labour. In religious systems where a clerical or priestly caste is defined, ‘ethics’ in the form of intellectual reflexivity or a heightened sensitivity to the presence of moral contradiction can also be thought about as labour divided across differing categories of people (cf. Bandak & Boylston 2014; Khan Forthcoming; Laidlaw 1995; Malara & Boylston 2016; Mayblin 2017). Actual divisions of ethical labour may not map perfectly onto formal designation (i.e. perhaps the most reflexive subjects in a given system are not the priests or the ritual specialists). In other religious systems, ethical process might

³ Equally, the claim that Jains are reflexive subjects is not necessarily a claim that they are so in the absence of a ‘system’. As Heywood (2015) has argued in his discussion of *Doppia Morale* (double morality) in Italy, the anthropology of ethics does not necessarily require us to understand freedom as the absence of constraint.

⁴ Examinations of this topic have a long pedigree within the social sciences. For interesting overviews, see: Schelling 1978; Evens and Handleman 2005 plus essays within that special issue; and Faulk Moore 1987.

be spread more evenly among individuals as, for instance, in societies where individuality, interiority, and sincerity have come to be highly valued (see Keane 2007). And yet, even in these more ‘equally spread’ contexts it may well be that, from a systemic vantage point, intensities of ethical labor remain unevenly distributed (see Malara in this volume).

In recent literature on failure and imperfection in ‘lived’, ‘ambivalent’, or ‘everyday’ religion (e.g. Fahy 2017; Marsden 2009; Oustinova-Stjepanovic 2017; Schielke & Debevec 2012; Schielke 2009a, 2009b), the possibility that ethics is a process with unevenly distributed intensities is barely elaborated. This may be, in part, because systemic vantage points have become somewhat unfashionable, but it is also an effect of the fact that accounts of ethical equivocation have become a much larger part of the written ethnographic landscape. Ethnographies work by zooming in on the messy, processual manner in which individuals strive and achieve a sense of ‘religious meaning’ (Engelke & Tomlinson 2006); they provide close-up views of the disruptive, but often surprisingly invigorating effects of ‘accidents’ and ‘contingencies’ on moral worlds. As such, what a good deal of recent anthropological work on ethics has provided us with are fine-grained accounts of disciplinary hiccups, moments of weakness, and failures of willpower from the first-person perspective. Out of this we have achieved a detailed picture of ‘how senses of failure invigorate lived religion’ (Kloos & Beekers 2018). In much of this literature, failure is imminently redeemable, in so far as it fosters desires for perfection, or propels higher moral yearnings. Kloos, for example, critiques Debevec, for describing her Muslim interlocutor’s ‘postponement’ of prayer and piety merely as a negotiation ‘complex’ lives, and argues instead that not-praying should be approached as an ethical mode, and therefore as something which ‘contributes to personal, lifelong and often unpredictable processes of ethical improvement’ (2018: 94). He clarifies his position as ‘part of a broader trend in anthropology to study expressions of uncertainty,

doubt and imperfection as grounds for action' (ibid.).

While we have no argument with the widely documented finding that humans respond to failure and obstacles with remarkable reflexivity, and are therefore adept at transforming stumbling blocks into productive pathways of moral and philosophical reflection, we would question the view that failure necessarily demands taxing ethical work or that it inevitably results in 'grounds for action'. On this point, it is worth noting that what many of the authors in the broader trend to view failure as grounds for action have in common are, again, ethnographic fieldsites in which reformist versions of Abrahamic religions are dominant. This risks leaving a particular kind of dent in the topology of contemporary social theory. Webb Keane (2007) and Adam Seligman (2010) have shown that what we normally call the 'modern' period is one in which sincerity claims have been given a rare institutional and cultural emphasis (and this is particularly the case in reformist or revivalist versions of Christianity and Islam). The dent in the topology of social theory is thus, we contend, 'sincerity shaped'.

When we look to other cultural and religious contexts – in particular to subjects engaged with religious traditions that are not monotheistic or essentially world renouncing – we find models of personhood and concepts of 'self' radically different from those suggested by contemporary anthropological reflection on ethics and religion. As Espirito-Santo's paper serves to show, the Palo sense of self is, by definition, a fragment in a constant state of assemblage and re-assemblage, incorporating shifting, unstable proportions of human and non-human, spirit and matter both internal and external to the subject. And, insofar as this type of unbounded self is constituted differently from the classical Foucauldian subject, it gives rise to very different sets of theoretical questions. The Palo 'self' is subjectable to truth

claims and power-relations, but subjectable to them in radically different ways from the Christian or Islamic subject. For the Cuban Paleros described by Espirito Santo, the desired telos of efforts at disciplining the self and its relationships with the world is not moral perfection so much as a life unencumbered by witchcraft and illness. As in many recognizable ethnographic contexts, being struck down by witchcraft is not processed as moral failure, nor does being a victim of witchcraft reflect anything particular about one's inner state. As such, although addressing witchcraft attack through specialized Palo ritual is an action requiring creativity and intellect, it does not shore up any hidden, ongoing and singular project of personal moral improvement.

An article by Bloch on ritual modes of illocution as 'quotation' provides an instructive example of some of the wider implications of the point made above, and is worth examining here. Bloch foregrounds the concept of deference to account for those situations in which heightened reflexivity, awareness of one's intentionality and the alignment between social actions and interior states are somewhat bracketed (cf. Keane 2007). As he writes, 'The ordinary continual deference of practical life does not simply involve delaying our search for intentionality, but often apparently largely abandoning it' (Bloch 2004:127). The social mechanics of deference are particularly relevant to the systemic view of religion we have proposed. For instance, in those institutional settings where there exists a clear division of religious labour – intellectual, theological, ethical or otherwise – we can discern more clearly the dynamics of the socio-cultural regulation of 'Situations when the truth of certain propositions is to be accepted through deference, and therefore not necessarily understood' (ibid.). In such contexts, practitioners are more likely to renounce the role of authoritative, critical actor by deferring to 'the ancestors', doing only 'what was done in the past,' or looking to other authoritative religious figures for interpretative guidance (see also Laidlaw

1994). Deference, as Bandak and Boylston point out, is both a matter of ‘acquiescing to authority or putting the issue off in time’ (2014: 34), by, for instance, leaving an ethical question temporarily unaddressed in order to continue living life relatively unencumbered by it. Attempts to grasp the workings of lenience within complex religious systems, we suggest, need to account for, on the one hand, these strategies of suspension and deferral and, on the other, for what Bloch identifies as ‘moments when there are not only limits to understanding, but limits to the appropriateness of attempting to understand’ (2004: 127).

In contrast to the continuous demands of heightened reflexivity imposed on religious subjects in certain traditions, in a number of religious systems, deference and deferral are necessary for the system to reproduce itself and might, as such, be viewed as technologies of lenience. Bandak and Boylston’s take on deference and deferral within Orthodoxy illustrates our point succinctly:

For a relatively fixed, institutional doctrine to apply to everyone, that doctrine must be sufficiently flexible in its application to encounter a wide range of situations without being invalidated. It must also be able to cope with a certain degree of deviation on the part of its members, clergy and laity alike. Otherwise, orthodoxies would become inapplicable to present circumstances. . . . [W]hat many people consider a proper moral life seems impossibly far off, and in these circumstances adhering to some of the formal tenets of the Church provides a root of belonging while keeping open the possibility of becoming a better Christian in the future A formal ritual framework provides these orientation points without encompassing the whole lives of the faithful or steering them to making assertive statements that they will then be compelled to contradict. The

formal structures of the Church persist even if priests fail their flock (Bandak & Boylston 2014: 34-35).

While we shall return to the issue of ‘structural flexibility’ and its broader implications later, here we wish only to call for a finer appreciation of the manner in which individuals trust in, defer to, and depend upon one another as members of a same religious collective (see Malara and Reinhardt in this volume). In other words, we need a more refined understanding of discipline’s relation to lenience as well as of the varied relational operations that lenience affords.

Although some of the essays in this section draw productively on Foucault’s oeuvre in order to unpack the dialectics of discipline and within projects of religious pedagogy (Reinhardt), others caution us against a-priori assumptions that subjectivity is necessarily to be understood within the parameters of a Foucauldian framework. What all the contributions to this section do, however, is challenge us to think about lenience – whether as ‘fluidity’ (Espirito Santo), as ‘relational economy’ (Malara), or as ‘degrees’ of spiritual maturity – in a range of abstract and concrete ways that take us beyond first-person narratives. We hereby echo Keane’s view that the most thought-provoking insights of anthropology do not derive simply from the first-person perspective, but rather ‘from ongoing movement back and forth between intimacy and the more distant view of the third person’ (2014: 447). Taking ethics seriously, argues Keane, would not mean taking people only at face value and resting content with an account of subjectivities, for, it would mean thinking ‘dispassionately’ about ‘the sources and consequences of self-deception, blindness, and distortions’ (ibid).

If we are to accept that ‘self-deception’, ‘blindness’, and ‘deference’ are as necessary for social systems to function as sincerity, meaning, and coherence, we need to remain mindful

that academic analyses of doubt, ambiguity, and failure as ultimately productive may be only one link in the crystalline organization of a given social structure. Scaling upwards, we might find that ‘failing well’ as a first-person account driven by distinct ethical scripts gives way to ‘systemic lenience’ which - even if it overlaps with first-person accounts - only comes sharply into focus when viewed from afar. Systemic lenience may incorporate spaces in which failure can be compartmentalized, via logics of deference or, even, self-deception. However, it is worth noting that this is not a complete turn away from human reflexivity, nor is it a denial that failure can generate ‘action’; it is merely a way of remaining attentive to the possibilities of ‘blindness’ and inaction. A turn to lenience, then, opens our analyses up to a greater variety of systemic patterns and their concatenating effects.

Tropes and technologies of lenience and their systemic functions

In this special section, we want to move away from Foucault’s expansive notion of discipline-as-subject-formation, in order to see the criss-cross of affects and associations contained within that English word. As a folk concept discipline is often much narrower in scope. Associated with punishment, a discipline is, *even if self-imposed*, ‘punishing’ and therefore on some level – no matter how small and seemingly invisible that level – unpleasant in some way. Putting it crudely, we could say that if there is no pull of unpleasantness in whatever act or thought or word we are calling ‘disciplinary’ it isn’t really discipline. If a person had an innate love of freezing cold showers (i.e. they did not need to *learn* to like cold showers), then taking cold showers could never be a discipline for them. Their daily regime of cold showers could not really be called a ‘regime’ – it would be more accurate to call it an indulgence. Taking several cold showers a day? For that person it would be a vice. At the

most basic level, to speak of discipline in these terms is to speak of experience that is cognitively, emotionally or physically taxing of human energy. The fact of the matter is that although disciplines promise eventual ease, that ease is always future-oriented. We need discipline to plant in us habits, but once a habit has taken root we are, again, at ease. In the actual moment, not looking to some future point, a discipline is *not* the same as a habit. A discipline requires more energy than a habit, and it seems to sap us in certain ways that are hard to define.

If human life involves myriads of ‘pleasant actions’ and ‘taxing actions’ – the intensity of taxing/pleasant we are actually talking about will vary for every person – it is clearly from this complex palette that interior subjectivity emerges. Yet, this does not necessarily make subjectivity the ‘unmoved mover’ of all social life, as it is clear that in addition to willpower and effort, human energy can be ‘caused’ and ‘curtailed’ by forces external to the self. Heavily ideational notions of discipline can therefore only take us so far. To speak of disciplinary systems is to speak of a multiplicity of qualities and effects, which are all, in some ways, interdependent on one another – from the harshness of punishments to the ‘looseness’ of laziness or the ‘lessening’ of mercy. However, it is to *lenience* in particular that this special section is particularly dedicated. The importance of lenience as a quality is particularly clear if we look to the laws of physics and to the different kinds of potential afforded by various physical materials. As a proxy for lenience we might think, for a moment, about flexibility as a desired property in the world of structural engineering. It is well known, for example, that the more flexible a structure is, the less energy required to keep it from toppling or collapsing under force and movement. A person can feel this same phenomenon while riding a bus or train standing up. It requires less effort to stay upright if

you flex your body, leaning into the bumps and jolts, than if you stiffly try to defy them.

Remaining for a moment with mechanical principles it is interesting to note that structural engineers tasked with building earthquake resistant structures pay a good deal of attention to the ductility of materials. When engineers speak of ductility they mean the pliability of a substance, the ease with which it may be pulled, temporarily, into other shapes. Ductility is necessary for the absorption and dispersal of stress from outside sources. Structural engineers sometimes incorporate what are known as 'moment-resisting frames' into buildings: frames in which the columns and beams are allowed to bend, but the joints or connectors between them are rigid. Lead-rubber bearings would provide an alternative option: the lead core makes the bearing stiff and strong in the vertical direction, while the rubber and steel bands make the bearing flexible in the horizontal direction. Simply put, the safety of large physical structures rests on a mixture of rigidity and flexibility. Columns that have 'give', buildings that have 'sway'.

The importance of lenience in the overall materiality of a building may be counter-intuitive to normal understandings of buildings (as hard, unyielding concrete-like structures) or at least invisible from certain viewpoints. But this does not mean that lenience is not an important quality. As Talcott Parsons long ago identified:

Every social system is a functioning entity. That is, it is a system of interdependent structures and processes such that it tends to maintain a relative stability and distinctiveness of pattern and behaviour as an entity by contrast with its - social or other - environment, and with it a relative independence from environmental forces. It "responds", to be sure, to the environmental stimuli, but

is not completely assimilated to its environment, maintaining rather an element of distinctiveness in the face of variations in environmental conditions. (1954: 143)

Parsons' description of 'social systems' as 'interdependent structures and processes' may seem somewhat old-fashioned, but it points to the fact that social life is always, in part, *a response to* 'environmental stimuli'. And thus, if thinking through the 'moment-resisting frame' gives us some purchase on the function of flexibility in the physical world, thinking about the work of the seismic engineer shows how lenience – whether as principle, as property, or effect – is present in otherwise rigid and unyielding systems all around us (religious or otherwise). In his many reflections on informal economies, James Scott takes the notion of lenience in an interesting direction by observing how in any office or factory, work 'cannot be adequately explained by the rules, however elaborate, governing it' (2014: 46). The smooth running of any system, he insists, means bending the rules; in other words, *demanding lenience* of them. One example Scott provides concerns the Parisian taxi drivers who, whenever they were frustrated with the municipal authorities over fees or new regulations, would resort to the 'work-to-rule' strike (*greve de zèle*) by, on cue, collectively following all the regulations in the *code routier* (traffic laws), thereby bringing the traffic in Paris to a grinding halt (ibid.: 46). What the effects of a 'work-to-rule' strike point to is the sheer dependence of complex systems on different levels of openness to discipline. In order to successfully reproduce themselves, systems – whether they are organic, mechanical, social, or structural – need to incorporate leniency at some level. By using the example of the *greve de zele*, Scott gives us the systemic vantage point. Lenience only becomes apparent as a functioning property with causal effects on the world (its allows for the smooth flow of

traffic) when we abstract the city and consider it as a system.⁵

All the same, lenience tends to be more emphasised, the more exacting the overall disciplinary regime. For an example of this, we might look to the popular money management website: ‘You Need a Budget’ (YNAB). YNAB is a multi-platform personal budgeting program which helps people to know and therefore better control every single penny that passes through their account. Although basically tied up with the purchase of software, YNAB is extremely popular as a budgeting philosophy based on ‘four rules’ which, if followed faithfully, are meant to help people achieve difficult financial goals: save up for a house, pay off a car, eradicate all debt. The system involves extreme self-discipline and constant awareness: being meticulously intentional about where one’s money is going; saving on a regular basis (no matter how small the amount saved), and keeping a rigorous account of every penny spent. But, in the process of creating such budgets, YNABers are strongly advised to build in some slack, as it were. Committed YNABers report often on the importance of factoring lenience into one’s budget on Internet threads. This takes the form of treating oneself to small frivolities on a regular basis such as a bunch of flowers once a week, a Starbucks coffee every now and then – whatever your frivolity may be. A person who does not do this is much less likely to go the long term with their budget keeping. Make the rules too strict and you set yourself up for failure; better to build lenience into one’s financial flow or, more significantly, better to preventively take control of failure than to let failure control you. What we find noteworthy here, what we think makes this truly *systemic*, is the idea that large-scale failure can be averted by premeditating smaller-scale failures. A principle of inoculation is somehow involved: prevention of the illness involves exposure to the virus. By

⁵ For a more sustained discussion of systems theory, see Luhmann 2012.

indulging one's 'weakness' for Starbucks every so often one turns it into something legitimate and predictable, and weakness writ large is successfully contained.

As the YNAB example suggests, elaborated disciplinary regimes at once produce, and are reproduced by lenient moments allowing for the loosening and lessening of taxing demands. Mary Douglas' seminal formulation of group and grid theory provides a useful anthropological antecedent to the observation that the different overall intensities of certain qualities in systems (acephalousness or hierarchy, for example) map onto different levels of elaboration and cultural ornamentation of lenience. Although her theory is articulated in significantly different ways in various texts (see Douglas 1978, 1982), Douglas identified two broad analytical dimensions or axis on which typologies of social organization can be plotted. The group dimension refers to the degree of incorporation of individuals within communities' boundaries and measures the extent to which the lives of social actors is constrained by the group due to their mere belonging. The grid dimension measures the amount of social control that group members accept. At the opposite end of the grid's incremental axis, one encounters highly hierarchical societies with comprehensive, stringent regulations and social groups where social obligations are less prominent, being negotiated on more of an ad hoc basis. The link with our interest in lenience is particularly evident in Douglas' discussion of the relation between constraints and group boundaries: 'At one end of the scale you are a member of a religious group though you only turn up on Sundays, or perhaps annually. At the other end there are groups such as convents and monasteries which demand full-time, life-time, commitment' (Douglas 2006:3). While a discussion of the types of social organizations placed along grid and group axes is beyond the scope of this introduction, the papers in this volume contribute to a novel theorisation of the variegated spectrum of religious systems within which flexibility and lenience – and flexibility as lenience – might be more or less

conspicuous, required, contested or desirable. In other words, they invite us to remain attentive to the possible differences between and diverse effects of lenient disciplines versus disciplined leniencies.

As we noted, by training a lens on lenience via discipline, we can better attend to failures and deviations that are, to varying degrees, preempted by the social systems in which they are embedded – and which, therefore, allow for a smooth flow of action. That is, we are less interested in problems of contingency per se, and more in identifying spaces in which disciplinary breakdowns have been anticipated and any fall-out therefore mitigated. The distinction is a subtle but important one: contingent disruption versus premeditated failure. Lenience as we find it in the papers that follow is brought into focus in various ways: as the foundational flexibility of cosmos and selfhood (Espirito-Santo); as the ‘loosely controlled periphery’ of a highly organized Ghanaian denomination (Reinhart); and as the embodied processes whereby Ethiopian Orthodox Christians ‘balance out’ iniquities in ascetic practice (Malara). In two of the ethnographic contexts looked at here (Reinhart and Malara), lenience encompasses a discourse or practice, intentionally carved into a systemic arrangement, thereby containing and taming the dangers of moral transgression. In the third contribution to this section, lenience – in the form of plasticity – emerges more in the guise of an ontological principle. Rather than being described by Espirito-Santo as a kind of technology designed to contain, absorb, or sublimate transgression, lenience as ontological flexibility constitutes the very essence of persons. It is only because the Palo person is, by nature, a fluid and de-centered entity, constantly creating and recreating itself in terms of its physical, metaphysical and spiritual boundaries, that it is both vulnerable to, and able to solve the kinds of problems that beset it.

All the same, systemic explorations that shore lenience up as, in some way, effective at problem solving should not distract us from noticing when lenience encounters its limits. In other words, just as lenience gives rise to ethics, so it can entail its own kind of politics. As Mayblin (2017) has described, extreme technologies of lenience in the form of Catholic indulgences allowed for a kind of social elasticity and institutional growth throughout the late Middle Ages which might otherwise have been impossible. And yet, the incredible leniency provided by indulgences was not, we know today, infinite. By 1517, the level of lenience (or economic convenience) that the indulgence seemed to proffer was found, by many, to be too extreme and this pushed the system (in this case the Catholic Church) into a profound state of instability and crisis. Along came the Protestant Reformation, causing the fragmentation of that particular system. Many of the new denominations that emerged in the wake of the schism, rejected the system of indulgences; and, although the Catholic Church did not cancel its underpinnings, by 1567 the papacy had banned the sale of indulgences. In this context, then, it can be said that lenience went too far, triggering centuries of bottled up anger against the clergy to overflow, and producing both qualitative and quantitative changes to the system. To speak of religious systems is thus to speak of complex dynamic entities that are always historically situated and never entirely ‘finished’. In other words, systems are responsive but not, in themselves, ‘ethical’. The effects of ‘systems’ on people may trigger and engage human modes of reflexivity – but human reflexivity is only ever one of several ‘moving parts’ in a system. Other, intercalated ‘parts’ may produce effects via ‘mechanical’ modes of being-in-the-world. To speak of ‘systems’ is thus to embrace multiple modes of being-in-the-world, all, in some ways, interdependent on one another.

The essays

The papers in this volume give us a sense of the wide gamut in which discipline is played out and articulated in a number of very different traditions beyond the Catholic Church. But, more importantly, this ethnographic panoramic aims to provocatively raise the question of how technologies of lenience operate in (and outside) the realm of religiosity and what their relevance is to our understanding of power, discipline and complex organizations.

Drawing on research conducted among Ethiopian Orthodox residents of Addis Ababa, Malara's article asks what religious discipline looks like for people who take Christianity seriously, but are not necessarily assiduous church-goers or even, as they see it, 'good Christians'. Shifting the focus from the cloister to the city, from the pious to the non-churchgoer – in contrast with studies focusing on individuals and groups whose religious life is characterized by virtuosity, commitment, and zealous activism – Malara interrogates the salience of fasting to the religious lives of ordinary urban Christians. Such a shift brings to light a division of religious labour whereby less disciplined fasting subjects may still access the 'blessing' produced by others in a relational economy of spiritual care. This division of labour allows for a variety of ethical stances, not all of which transform moral inadequacy into something productive or regenerative, such as a resolution to 'do better'. Rather, for certain individuals who are unable or unwilling to live up to the highest disciplinary standards, moral inadequacy can be relativized with reference to different encompassing frames – such as one's time in the overall life-cycle, or when in the religious year, with its inbuilt seasons of lenience and carnal enjoyment alternated to those of fasting and repentance. By re-situating anthropological discussions of discipline around the routine management of imperfection, Malara reveals how an intricate tapestry of intimate relationships produces systemic leniency. Strong relational links between those who do not fast fully and pious individuals who are 'fasting for others' ensures that in any given period

of fasting, enough overall fasting, is achieved. In this context, in which spiritual intercession is a central feature, disciplinary labour is essentially other-oriented, prompting Malara to ask if the anthropological fascination for ‘technologies of the self’ might be obscuring the relevance of ‘technologies of the others’. In the Ethiopian case, it is precisely the disciplined ‘technologies of others’ that ‘balances out’ the absence of discipline at the level of the self.

Similar concerns find echo in Reinhardt’s contribution, which takes the problem of lenience as an opportunity to rethink religious discipline ‘beyond the self’. Rather than contrasting lenience and its related themes – such as the contingency of religious lives – to discipline, Reinhardt highlights their dialectical entanglements within normative projects, showing us how religious pedagogy works from the point of view of the broader organization and community of practice large Pentecostal-charismatic Ghanaian denomination. The Lighthouse Chapel International (LCI) recognizes the multiple levels of commitment that characterize its membership, as well as the diverse motivations that lead its members to stray from expected paths of behavior and uses lenience to deflect it. Here, disciplinary ‘misfire’, far from being an unusual or extra-normative part of the LCI system, is very much a part of it. Misfire works as a kind of hinge articulating two relatively autonomous *telois* of Pentecostal Christianity: an evangelistic and quantitative concern with ‘church growth’, and an apostolic and qualitative concern with ‘spiritual maturity’. Lenience manifests as an expression of *phronesis* or situated judgment – a theme explored from a different angle in Malara’s paper – as it calibrates disciplinary demands according to the converts’ level of ‘spiritual maturity’. The point in this, members of the LCI say, is not to ‘scare the sheep away’. By operating as an organizational principle in LCI, *phronesis* engenders a specific institutional design: a version of the visible ‘body of Christ’ with very loosely controlled peripheries but with a defined and highly structured center (the LCI’s Bible

school). Reinhardt analyses LCI's discipleship structures as a production line of souls in which discipline and lenience acquire various intensities and modes of implementation. In the institutional dynamics described it can be said that, to an extent, discipline contributes to transforming selves while lenience is key to the reproduction of the institution within which these transformations are supposed to occur.

In line with our concerns about lenience as flexibility, Espirito Santo's article contributes to a theory of fluidity and elasticity in dialogue with debates surrounding self-discipline. In order for a particular kind of self to emerge from the practice of Palo Monte, Espirito Santo suggests that we should turn away from a Foucauldian understanding of self and body as materially self-evident, contained and discrete, proposing instead that we attempt to grasp bodies' heterogeneous historicity in which materiality plays a key part in the workings of power. Focusing on Afro-Cuban Palo Monte religion, Espirito-Santo argues that we can, and indeed should understand the religious person in a non-essentialist fashion, as an assemblage in which in which material components play a critical role in determining the relative stability of some persons rather than others. These conditions allow ontologically discrepant 'bits' of the cosmos and the person to become stuck together for particular purposes, leading to what some would call 'synchronicities'. The ritual specialists of Palo Monte can be trained into producing these synchronicities in the form of witchcraft, for instance, in which coherences are sought between plants, animals, spirit forms, people and their indeterminate relations. It is by disciplining elements external to the subject that one finds a fluid or flexible sense of self – a sense that is formed and sustained by the inherent flexibility inherent to Palo Monte's tradition.

What these combined papers do is to explore the complex dialectics between discipline and lenience. They present various registers in which lenience emerges as a counterpart to discipline by exploring sharply different ethnographic contexts of religious practice. The papers speak collectively to the fact that lenience is not to be understood as opposed to discipline but rather as constitutive of it, essential to its very mechanics. This recognition provokes us to reconsider, both ethnographically and conceptually, the systemic dimension of religious action as well as the centrality of flexibility and lenience in a variety of cultural environments, whether these be intricately regimented or loose and unpredictable. Rather than discipline it could be lenience – spatial, temporal, ethical, ideational – which allows all sorts of systems to endure through time by foregrounding, accommodating, containing or transforming the human capacity for inertia, inadequacy and rebellion.

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